

1 This chapter describes the historical development of learning communities within American higher education. We examine the forces both internal and external to higher education that contributed to and stalled the emergence of learning communities in their contemporary form.

A History of Learning Communities Within American Higher Education

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Learning communities have become prominent throughout the course of U.S. higher education history. In their contemporary form, learning communities have commonly been defined as “curricular linkages that provide students with a deeper examination and integration of themes or concepts that they are learning” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999, as cited in Inkelas & Soldner, 2012, p. 2). Using this definition, we describe the historical evolution of learning communities in the United States from the early colonial colleges through the 21st century. Ultimately, the evolution of learning communities and their role within higher education were based upon forces both internal and external to higher education. The contemporary definition of a learning community encompasses residential and nonresidential types, yet the residential model was most prominent in the early history of learning communities within the United States. Thus, we begin with the history of residential learning communities.

“Oxbridge” Residential College Model

Colonial influence established learning communities as a central facet of the American college experience at the conception of U.S. higher education. Chaddock (2008) argued that one motive for establishing the early American colleges “was to plant British culture and intellect on the rugged and raw terrain of the infant colonies” (p. 10). Therefore, founders of several American colleges drew upon two prominent English universities, Oxford and Cambridge. This “Oxbridge” inspiration included a residential college model that was the precursor to contemporary living-learning programs. Colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, William and Mary, and Yale followed

the Oxbridge residential college model by colocating students' sleeping quarters, dining halls, lecture halls, tutor residences, and common areas. Intent on molding students' whole selves, students and their tutors lived, worked, studied, and socialized together as a part of the residential college model. Despite debate on the extent to which the Oxbridge residential college model was precisely replicated in the early colonial colleges, the Oxbridge model has sustained significance for contemporary discussion of learning communities (Inkelas & Soldner, 2012).

While the Oxbridge residential college model was a core component at some institutions, the residential college model did not initially flourish in U.S. higher education. Chaddock (2008) argued that, around the turn of the 19th century, the growth in student population and the questionable value of integrating academic and residential life contributed to a departure from the Oxbridge residential college ideal. For example, in order to accommodate larger numbers of students, Harvard and Yale built dormitories that deviated from the residential college model. Furthermore, the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 coincided with the growing importance of discipline-focused graduate training and research production for faculty members. Despite the central role residential colleges played in early American higher education, the rise of the research university and its Germanic model of higher education in the 19th century precluded the residential college model from retaining prominence amid the expanding landscape.

Foundational Reformers in the 20th Century

Critiques of the Germanic model of higher education from within the academy created internal pressure for learning communities to regain prominence at the turn of the 20th century. Educational philosophers John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn provided substantive critiques of the Germanic model of higher education, and in doing so laid the philosophical foundation for the contemporary learning community movement. John Dewey valued students' holistic development, and he critiqued the Germanic model of higher education as not fully engaging students with their learning. Dewey believed that learning should be active and collaborative where students drive their own discovery. Ideal learning environments from Dewey's perspective would take place in both academic and cocurricular settings, as well as situating learning as "shared inquiry" between students and teachers rather than the one-way transfer of knowledge from expert to student (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Furthermore, as a pragmatist, Dewey critiqued educational institutions as being too divorced from society. In his calls for education reform, Dewey claimed that student learning ideally should be experiential, applied, and connected to societal problems (Nelson, 2001).

Meiklejohn departed from Dewey in his perspective on the role of educational institutions within society. Throughout his tenure as president at

Amherst College during World War I, Meiklejohn deepened his conviction that “First [and foremost], the college should be withdrawn from the world of affairs in order to remain entirely unbiased” (Meiklejohn, as cited in Nelson, 2001, p. 95). Meiklejohn also problematized the rise of the Germanic model of higher education and subsequent intellectual fragmentation into distinct academic disciplines. Specifically, Meiklejohn critiqued the increasingly prevalent elective system as too incoherent. He foresaw the challenge to general education presented by the Germanic model and instead sought an integrated core curriculum for students (Smith et al., 2004). Critiquing higher education from within the academy, Dewey and Meiklejohn initially situated learning communities as powerful tools for educational reform.

Leaving Amherst, Meiklejohn sought a new educational setting to apply his vision of the ideal college and founded the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. Described as the “progenitor of the modern living-learning program” (Inkelas & Soldner, 2012, p. 14), the Experimental College played a key role in learning community history despite its brief existence from 1927 to 1932. Both the content and process of learning were innovative in the Experimental College. Contrasting the prevalent elective system, students took a two-year common curriculum focused on democracy and classical Western thought. Furthermore, students engaged in the educative process in more active and collaborative ways that contrasted with that of their fellow university students. For example, students learned through team-taught and clustered courses, as well as shared residences and dining facilities. Assigned to students to complete in the summer between their first and second years, the “Regional Study” project challenged students to investigate how their hometowns operated as democracies. This project exemplified the active and experiential nature of learning within the Experimental College. Students also formed clubs, such as the Philosophy and Law clubs, to extend the learning environment beyond their coursework (Nelson, 2001; Smith et al., 2004). However, after just five years, the Experimental College’s drastically different expectations of students, compensation of faculty, and curricular design garnered campus criticism, and it subsequently closed. Yet, Meiklejohn’s use of a learning community model as an attempt at reform within higher education, particularly at large research universities, was echoed in the rise of the learning community movement in the latter half of the 20th century.

Learning Community Innovation Amid Post-WWII Expansion

The substantial increase in the amount and diversity of students seeking higher education after passage of the WWII G.I. Bill was another key influence in the history of learning communities. To meet the demands of the larger and more diverse population of students seeking postsecondary education, a range of different types of institutions developed in the 20th

century. At the time, land grant universities and small, liberal arts colleges were common, but new types of institutions such as junior colleges, community colleges, technical schools, teachers colleges, regional institutions, and minority-serving institutions developed to meet growing demands for postsecondary education (Thelin, 2003). Furthermore, the growth in number and diversity of both students and institutions after WWII yielded later scrutiny of educational quality. Once again internal reformers experimented with learning communities to address questions of higher educational quality. Smith and others (2004) described a small group of academics, inspired by previous reformers like Meiklejohn, who created multiple innovations to promote quality undergraduate education. Among these were innovations at the University of California, San Jose State, LaGuardia Community College, and Stony Brook, and the creation of Evergreen State College. These reformers, Smith et al. argued, brought forth the contemporary learning community movement. The following sections describe a few prominent examples of these internal reforms in the second half of the 20th century.

Tussman's Learning Community at Berkeley. A protégé of Meiklejohn's, Joseph Tussman developed a learning community at UC Berkeley, similar to Meiklejohn's Experimental College, which provided an interdisciplinary, two-year curriculum aimed at preparing students to be democratic citizens. Students learned through self-guided study and writing-intensive team-taught courses, and the learning community also enjoyed a distinct physical space that supported the creation of community. Despite only existing from 1965 to 1969, Tussman's learning community reflected his belief that undergraduate education should focus on democratic participation, even at large research universities. As a critic of higher education, Tussman noted years after the Berkeley learning community was suspended, "The fundamental delusion may have been to suppose that it was possible for a great organism like the university to sustain for long an enterprise so at odds with its essential nature" (Tussman, as cited in Smith et al., 2004, p. 42). The tension between undergraduate student learning and research production, central to Tussman's critique of higher education, maintains relevance in contemporary learning community initiatives.

Early Learning Community Initiatives. Multiple learning community initiatives took form in the 1960s and 1970s during and following Tussman's experiment at Berkeley. Simultaneous to Tussman, Mervyn Cadwallader created a similar learning community at San Jose State in California. In fact, as Smith et al. (2004) noted, Cadwallader, Tussman, and Meiklejohn interacted multiple times in the 1960s, exchanging ideas and planning contemporary versions of the Experimental College. Similarly, Cadwallader's learning community only lasted from 1965 to 1969, encountering many of the same challenges as did the learning community at Berkeley. Cadwallader again endeavored to implement his educational reforms at the State University of New York–Old Westbury but was unsuccessful as the university was in turmoil and closed shortly after Cadwallader arrived.

However, other reformers on the east coast began to form learning communities around the same time. Roberta Matthews was an associate dean at LaGuardia Community College interested in fostering collaborative, interdisciplinary education at community colleges. Under her leadership, LaGuardia established a learning clusters model wherein students coenrolled in multiple, similar courses with coordinated curricula. Faculty teams at LaGuardia Community College carefully aligned their curricula to provide an integrated learning experience for students. Meanwhile, Patrick Hill, a philosophy professor at State University of New York–Stony Brook, launched a federated learning community initiative at Stony Brook. Hill is noteworthy for resurfacing the term “learning community” and for translating the learning community model to research universities. In Hill’s federated learning communities, students would coenroll in two existing university courses and a third integrative seminar. Alongside the cohort of students taking these three courses would be a faculty member, called the “master learner,” who also took the courses and directed the integrative seminar. The federated learning community model reflected Hill’s philosophy as a pragmatist in creating institutional change, as well as his way to address the enduring challenge of creating environments supportive of quality undergraduate education at research universities (Smith et al., 2004).

Evergreen State College. In the 1970s, multiple educational reformers organized as the founding faculty of the Evergreen State College in Washington. Creating a new institution allowed the founders to agree at the outset on the educational philosophy and structure of the college. The influence of Tussman and Meiklejohn was clear, Smith et al. (2004) argued, as Mervyn Cadwallader played a key role among the founding faculty members. From the founding of the college, everyone committed to team-taught, yearlong programs of study, and this structure was supported by other college policies such as faculty merit and organizational structure. Cadwallader was an influential early dean who sought to establish a Meiklejohn- and Tussman-inspired curriculum focused on preparing students as citizens for democracy. As the college developed, the pedagogies and teaching styles of Dewey, Meiklejohn, and Tussman remained central, but the content of coursework successfully expanded to a variety of topics. Evergreen State College has long since served as a leader in the contemporary learning community movement within higher education (Smith et al., 2004).

The Late 20th Century and the Era of Accountability in Higher Education

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by increasingly fervent calls for reform in U.S. undergraduate education. Eerily echoing the same allegations made by Dewey and Meiklejohn nearly a century earlier, critics described undergraduate education—especially at large public research universities—as too passive, disconnected, incoherent, and disengaging. Several policy agencies

and organizations issued reports identifying U.S. undergraduate education's shortfalls, including the National Institute of Education (NIE). In *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education* (NIE, 1984), the NIE called for U.S. colleges and universities to center their undergraduate educational opportunities on student learning. They advocated for institutions to (a) organize smaller communities of learning; (b) provide more formal and informal ways for faculty and students to interact more frequently with themselves and one another; and (c) integrate their curricula to be more inclusive, coherent, and connected.

From 1996 to 2000, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (2001) produced six reports in a series entitled *Returning to Our Roots*, in which they provided key recommendations to public and land-grant institutions regarding systemic change in public higher education. Providing similar descriptions of undergraduate education as were in *Involvement in Learning*, the Kellogg Commission added that undergraduate enrollment at large public universities has increased and continues to increase, and that the new enrollments are increasingly diverse by racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and college preparation backgrounds. At the same time, partly due to declines in state support for public higher education, undergraduate tuition has experienced a sharp increase, often at rates higher than other economic indicators.

Added to this dire picture was the growing fear that American education (K–16) was not preparing its youth to compete in the global economy. In 1983, the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which alleged that the U.S. educational system was failing to produce a globally competitive workforce. Taken together, then, U.S. undergraduate education—especially at large public universities—was taking in more undergraduates than ever, charging increasingly higher tuition, and delivering a subpar education that would not provide its graduates the necessary skills to compete in the global economy.

This combination of phenomena has resulted in an erosion of public trust, and has forced American higher education to create and institute new and improved ways to deliver its undergraduate education. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing to present day, state governments and accreditation agencies are requiring colleges and universities to account for the quality of their undergraduate experience, including information regarding access and retention, evidence of educational excellence, and justification for their costs. Simultaneously, parents and students are demanding to know what their tuition pays for, and exactly what will be the return on their investment (Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012).

Learning Communities as a Reform Effort. Many of the same reports chastising the current state of undergraduate education also provided recommendations for how institutions could improve their efforts, and many of them advocated for the creation of learning communities. The NIE

(1984) asserted that institutions needed to create smaller, more intimate learning spaces for students: “Every institution of higher education should strive to create learning communities, organized around specific intellectual themes or tasks” (p. 35). The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1997) similarly ended its *Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience* report calling for public and land-grant institutions to create learning communities.

More recently, in 2008, the Association of American Colleges and Universities released a report entitled *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Kuh, 2008). In it, George Kuh, using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and elsewhere, identified 10 postsecondary educational practices found empirically to confer substantial benefits to students and their college performance and retention. Included in the 10 practices are learning communities, but also included are first-year seminars and common intellectual experiences, which also could be construed as part of a broader definition of learning communities.

Types of Learning Communities. Given increasing demands by external stakeholders for undergraduate education accountability as well as explicit directives from policymakers on how to improve it, it is not surprising that so many U.S. colleges and universities—particularly large public research universities—took the advice of these policy organizations and created different forms of learning communities on their campuses. Smith et al. (2004) reported that by 2000, more than 500 institutions of different types and controls had established learning communities. Some campuses had even begun to require learning community participation as part of their general education program. Learning communities are now so ubiquitous on American college and university campuses that they have their own category in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings.

While there is no professional organization uniting individuals or campuses involved with learning communities, the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College has emerged as the *de facto* leader in the learning community movement. Through funding from the Washington state legislature, the Exxon Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, the Washington Center now serves as a support system for learning community efforts around the United States, promoting the sharing of information regarding learning community assessment data, promising practices, and implementation strategies (Smith et al., 2004; Washington Center at The Evergreen State College, 2013).

Along with the expansion in popularity of learning communities arose an expansion in our understanding of what constitutes a learning community. Over the years, several authors have constructed various typologies of learning communities, including Gabelnick et al. (1990), Shapiro and Levine (1999), Lenning and Ebbers (1999), Smith et al. (2004), and Lenning, Hill, Saunders, Stokes, and Solan (2013), as well as Inkelas,

Soldner, Longerbeam, and Leonard's (2008) empirical typology of residential learning communities, also known as living-learning programs. Inkelas and Soldner (2012) combined these various typologies into one master typology and suggested the following as an integrated model:

1. Paired or clustered courses.
2. Smaller cohorts among large enrollments, including FIGs and federated learning communities.
3. Coordinated or team-taught series of courses.
4. Learning communities for special populations (for example, women in STEM majors).
5. Residentially based learning communities. (p. 7)

These five types likely represent the most dominant forms of learning communities found on American college and university campuses today. But what is to come? What does the future hold for learning communities? Similar to its history, the future of learning communities will no doubt be shaped by external forces that higher education can no longer afford to ignore.

The Next Crossroad: Online and Technology-Infused Education

Anyone following U.S. higher education today knows that technology has forever changed the landscape of college teaching and the curriculum. Recently, the Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC, gained so much media coverage that the *New York Times* named 2012 the “Year of the MOOC.” However, MOOCs are just one type of mechanism through which technology has been infused in teaching and learning in American higher education. Harasim (2000) describes three primary modes of educational delivery using technology: (a) adjunct mode, (b) mixed mode, and (c) online mode. Adjunct mode is best characterized by an instructor's use of technology-enhanced support for various course functions (using email to communicate outside of class, administering online tests or examinations, etc.), but the traditional, in-class component remains the primary source of instruction. Mixed, or hybrid, mode involves using online components for a significant portion of a traditional course, so much so that in-class instruction is significantly altered. One of the more popular versions of the mixed mode is the “flipped classroom,” in which instructors deliver the lecture online via video and/or additional readings, thereby freeing up in-person class time to do more active learning types of activities, such as problem solving, case studies, and/or peer learning. Finally, the online mode uses the web or computer network as the primary vehicle for the course, with no in-person class component. More classic forms of distance learning such as virtual classrooms, as well as MOOCs, would be classified under this mode.

All three modes of technology-infused delivery systems raise new challenges for the notion of the learning community. Recalling that early *and* contemporary critics described undergraduate education as passive, impersonal, and disconnected, how do technological innovations that replace more and more of the in-person classroom function serve to change, or even eliminate, the concept of a community of learners? To be sure, MOOCs that can enroll more than 100,000 individuals in a single course stretch even the most imaginative boundaries of how the term “learning community” can be defined. What kind of faculty–student interaction in a MOOC is even possible with that many students? What online mechanisms must be created and cultivated in a MOOC to encourage peer collaboration in a class of that size? How do students achieve *depth* of learning in a course where content delivery is as asynchronous as a web format when anyone who registers for a MOOC class can view the course material at any time, in any place, and in any manner of choosing?

Yet, challenges to the learning community concept are not only germane to the MOOC. Even in the adjunct mode of delivery, we know little about how learning communities may be formed when the class utilizes blogs or discussion boards. For example, how can we ensure that diverse voices are heard in an online discussion board? How do we prevent students from reposting blog or discussion board comments to an external forum and thereby possibly destroying the sense of trust that is so critical in building a learning community? In the mixed mode, similar challenges may arise. For example, how do we successfully blend the content introduced in the online materials with the in-class discussions to create optimal learning environments? How do we create a different kind of learning climate in a classroom that may now be 100% based on active and collaborative learning practices when some students may not be accustomed to or comfortable in such a setting? Needless to say, there is much left to be studied when it comes to technology-infused education and learning communities.

Conclusion

Contemporary undergraduate education is an amalgamation of all of the forms of learning communities we have described in this short history. There are still plenty of examples of the Oxbridge model of residential colleges in existence, particularly at some of the nation’s most elite institutions. As mentioned previously, there are over 500 learning communities currently in operation in postsecondary institutions around the country, representing all forms in the learning community typology. And, now, with adjunct, mixed, and online versions of technology-rich courses, we have an ever-evolving notion of the 21st-century learning community. Each of these forms of learning communities resulted from internal or external forces placing pressure on American higher education to change its

practices—whether the pressure was to conform to British standards for educational quality, to make student learning more active and participatory, to educate a democratic citizenry, to account for increasing enrollments and tuition amid questions concerning a college education's value, or to adapt to technological advancements that revolutionize the sharing of information worldwide. What does the future hold, and what new pressures will bring to bear even greater changes in the learning community landscape? Only time will tell.

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